

NASA News

National Aeronautics and
Space Administration



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For Release: March 3, 2003

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Release: 03-04

CHIPS BEGINS INTERSTELLAR SEARCH FOR BIRTHPLACE OF SOLAR SYSTEMS

The Cosmic Hot Interstellar Plasma Spectrometer (CHIPS) satellite is living up to the adage "good things come in small packages," as the suitcase-size spacecraft is entering its second month of providing data to scientists about the birthplace of solar systems.

Launched on Jan. 12, 2003, from Vandenberg Air Force Base, Calif., CHIPS is exploring the very hot, very low-density gas in the vast spaces between the stars, known as the interstellar medium, searching for important clues about the formation and evolution of galaxies.

The interstellar medium literally contains the seeds of future stars. All the stars we see were once formed out of the same kind of diffuse gas and dust. When the gas cools and collapses, it forms clumps that scientists believe evolve into stars and planets. One of the biggest puzzles in astrophysics is the process that turns this very diffuse, dust, hot and cold gas into stars.

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"We are very excited that the satellite and CHIPS instrument are working as designed and providing excellent data," said Dr. Mark Hurwitz, CHIPS principal investigator from the University of California, Berkeley. "We look forward to gathering data during the next 12 months on this fairly unexplored region of space," he said.

After being in space a mere three weeks, CHIPS began gathering data February 2. Hurwitz said during the early phase of science operations, the teams will continue to fine tune the spacecraft and science instrument. Since the CHIPS satellite launch, the operations team at SpaceDev in Poway, Calif., and the science team at Berkeley, have been checking out the spacecraft's power, thermal and control systems, communications, and initializing the scientific instrument.

The CHIPS mission, the first NASA University-Class Explorer (UNEX) mission, cost about \$16 million, which includes flight hardware, integration and launch vehicle, data analysis and mission operations.

The Office of Space Science, NASA Headquarters, Washington sponsors the mission. The project is managed at NASA's Wallops Flight Facility, Wallops Island, Va., and the Goddard Space Flight Center, Greenbelt, Md.

For detailed information about CHIPS and its mission on the Internet, visit:

<http://chips.ssl.berkeley.edu>

or

<http://www.gsfc.nasa.gov/topstory/2002/1217chips.html>

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